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SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

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SUBJECT: POLITICAL OPPOSITION LEADER WARNS OF GROWING
RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

REF: (A) BISHKEK 831 (B) BISHKEK 783

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Larry L. Memmott, for Reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On September 14, Embassy met with the leader of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK), Almazbek Atambayev, to discuss the current political environment and plans for the opposition following the July presidential election. Atambayev, a former Prime Minister under President Bakiyev, ran for president in 2009 before suddenly withdrawing his candidacy on election day. In the meeting, Atambayev warned the Embassy that the Kyrgyz people are so disillusioned with democracy and current President Bakiyev that he fears they will turn to religious extremism to make their voices heard. A truly bitter Atambayev complained that President Bakiyev and his family ran the country like a personal fiefdom enriching themselves through total control over the economy. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Embassy met with Almazbek Atambayev, leader of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK), at his headquarters on September 14 to review the current political environment and the future of the opposition. Atambayev, a former Prime Minister, ran for president in the July election. On election day, when it became apparent that the President would win with an artificially high margin, Atambayev surprised all observers by declaring that he was withdrawing his candidacy to protest the election. Since the July election, the political opposition has been greatly marginalized and has not been able to generate a unified voice. Atambayev said that the government had done a good job muzzling the political opposition and civil society, noting that there were still 14 of his supporters being held on criminal charges for protesting in Balykchy.

¶3. (C) Atambayev was highly critical of the U.S. and the West for not forcefully denouncing the presidential elections, which he characterized as fraudulent and illegitimate. (NOTE: In the final official election count, Atambayev received approximately eight percent of the vote. END NOTE). An emotional Atambayev said that the Kyrgyz people can no longer believe in democracy and will have to find another mechanism for expressing their political views. Atambayev said he believed the political situation in Kyrgyzstan would only get worse, after the failure of the government to promote free and transparent elections.

¶4. (C) Atambayev said that he feared the Kyrgyz people would turn to religious extremism as the only way to have their opinions heard. He said that Kyrgyzstan could turn into an Iraq or Afghanistan. Atambayev said that only after visiting local mosques and listening to young worshipers complain

about the current political situation did he feel that Kyrgyzstan was slipping towards religious extremism. Atambayev almost immediately contradicted himself by saying that, unlike Uzbeks, the Kyrgyz people in general were not overly religious.

15. (C) Turning to the future of the opposition, Atambayev said that the opposition might consolidate into one or two main parties. He was not optimistic, however, that any opposition would be able to lead the country. Atambayev complained that President Bakiyev and his family, notably his son Maxim, ran the country as a personal fiefdom focused on controlling the economy. Atambayev was truly bitter at President Bakiyev's leadership and the results of the July presidential election while at the same time dispirited at his inability to affect either.

16. (C) COMMENT: This is the first time that Atambayev has expressed any concern regarding growing religious extremism in the political arena. There seems little reason to believe that the broader Kyrgyz population will embrace religious extremism as an outlet for what seems to be limited political frustration. Following the election, the political opposition, including Atambayev, have been searching for a way forward, so far, without success. The local Kyrgyz population, while generally unhappy with the way in which the election was carried out, may not be unhappy with its results, as Bakiyev remains personally somewhat popular. END COMMENT.
MEMMOTT